

REPORT No. 6.—Laundries.

THE laundry business of Sydney and suburbs is not an industry of any considerable magnitude, so far as the number of persons to whom it affords employment is concerned, but it assumes special importance by reason of its relation to the public health and of the various matters affecting the welfare of the employees which require attention.

ACCOMMODATION.

The structures in which the industry is carried on vary considerably in all their essential features, from the large well-appointed building, specially designed and constructed, with all the latest improvements in machinery and appliances, to the small half-open shed in the back yard of a private dwelling. The four establishments comprising the former class are clean, dry, and well drained, but the stables attached to them are, in some cases, not properly drained, as will be seen from the following table showing the arrangements in connection with them :—

Material.	Number of Rooms.		Horses in Stables.	Drainage of	
	Dwelling.	Laundry.		Stables.	Laundries.
Brick	...	4	4	Connected with sewer ...	Connected with sewer.
"	...	8	3	Inadequate sink	" "
"	4	7	3	Connected with sewer ...	" "
"	...	8	3	Not drained	" "

The conveniences provided for the workers in these establishments is in some respects highly unsatisfactory. It is true that cubic space, light, and ventilation are ample, except in the "hot rooms," to be referred to later, but there are no private rooms for the use of the women and girls, and the washers, who of necessity are compelled to change their clothing before and after work, must do so in the presence of the men and boys employed on the premises—an arrangement as unnecessary as it is offensive to modesty and decency. The sanitary conveniences are in some cases dark, dirty, and badly situated, and no separate provision is made for the women.

In the class of establishments not specially constructed for laundry purposes the accommodation so far as space, light, and ventilation are concerned, is generally ample, but the sanitary conveniences, though in some cases fairly good, are most frequently insufficient and inconveniently placed, and are used in common by both sexes. The washing-room floors are in many instances sloppy for want of adequate drainage, and very primitive contrivances are occasionally adopted to raise the workers out of the mud and water they would otherwise be required to stand in. In other respects the conditions where regular employment is afforded to a number of hands are as set forth in the following table :—

Laundries.	Construction.	No. of Rooms.		Stabling.	Drainage of	
		Dwelling.	Laundry.		Stables.	Laundry.
1	Brick.....	4	4	1 horse ...	Into lane at rear.....	Underground sewer.
2	"	3	3	1 " ...	Not drained.....	By street gutters 80 yards to sewer.
3	"	...	6	1 " ...	"	By street gutter 30 yards to sewer.
	"	...	6	3 horses..	Into yard sodden with stable refuse.	" "
4	"	3	3	1 horse ...	Into sink beside the washhouse	By " " " " 150 yards to sewer.
5	"	6	6	1 " ...	Not drained.....	By street gutter 50 yards to sewer.
6	"	3	5	2 horses...	"	Into sewer.
7	Wood	5	3	1 horse ...	"	Into Harbour.
8	Wood and stone ...	4	3	2 horses...	Into harbour	Underground sewer.
9	Wood	3	6	3 " ...	Not drained.....	" "
10	Brick.....	4	3	1 horse ...	"	" "
11	Stone.....	8	5	4 horses...	Into sewer	" "
12	Brick.....	...	8	2 " ...	Not drained. Large heap of manure.	" "
13	Wood	4	2	None		Into sewer.
14	Brick.....	4	3	"		Under floor of house by open drains into harbour.
15	Wood	5	2	"		

In many small laundries, where a very few women are employed, the conditions observed were usually such as are found in the humbler class of private dwellings.

Drainage is plainly the weak point of the laundry business, especially in the suburbs, where connection with the sewerage system is in general a matter of more or less difficulty. In most cases the open gutters of the streets form the only channels for carrying off the filthy soapsuds from private dwellings, as well as from public laundries. Even these are not always available, for in one case it was found that the foul water of a laundry is poured into a sink in the washing-room, from which an overflow pipe leads under the floor of the dwelling-house, and how much further is a matter of doubt, but certainly not to any distance, for at the lower side of the house the water reappears, flowing out in several channels, crosses some 20 or 30 feet of open ground, and empties directly into the harbour. The nuisance arising from the offensive odour of soapsuds is a lesser evil than the danger to the public health from the putrefaction, under the direct action of the sun, of the animal matter they contain, and for that reason it might be well that steps should be taken to prevent unsuitable premises being used as laundries.

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The drainage of stables connected with laundries is generally defective, only two having been reported as "well drained." Of the others many are not drained at all, whilst in some of the cases where drainage of a kind has been attempted the effect is worse than if nothing had been done. In one case the odour from stable manure and other refuse, steeped in stable drainage and trodden in wet weather into a pestilential and disgusting mash in an open yard, is distributed with the clothes dried in fine weather in the same yard.

HANDS EMPLOYED.

Excluding all the small half-time laundries and reckoning only twenty of the largest establishments, the numerical strength of the industry in the winter season is represented by about 414 hands, consisting of 48 males and 366 females. The number of males varies very little, but in the summer the number of females increases considerably, and the same establishments probably employ from 450 to 500 women and girls.

DIVISION OF LABOUR.

In the smaller laundries there is naturally very little diversity in the work done by the hands, who are generally speaking experts in all branches of the business. In those employing a great many hands, however, the work is minutely subdivided, each operation being performed by workers specially qualified and engaged for it, and called washers, wringers, starchers, starch-ironers, plain-ironers, shirt ironers, collar ironers, hangers out, folders, and sorters, names sufficiently descriptive to render explanation unnecessary. To enable them to decipher the marks on clothing and make out the list and account for each lot it is necessary that sorters should be able to read and write, and have some slight knowledge of arithmetic, and for this reason they are usually better educated than any other class of laundry employees.

WAGES.

Work is occasionally paid for by the piece, especially in the various grades under the head of ironing, but the ordinary basis of payment is time, the indispensable hands receiving weekly wages, and others a given rate per day for the number of days employed in each week. Shirt-ironers on piece-work are paid 1s. 3d. to 1s. 9d. per dozen, or 4s. for 2½ dozen; collar-ironers receive from 3d. to 4d. per dozen, and others according to circumstances. In laundries where machinery is used men employed as washers are paid from 27s. to 40s. a week; folders, 35s.; engine-drivers, 45s. to 60s.; firemen, 30s.; carters, 30s. to 45s.; handy men, 35s. to 42s.; boys, 10s. to 12s. The ordinary rates for the different classes of female workers are as follows:—

Class.	Daily Wages.		Average.	Weekly Wages.		Average.
	s.	d.	s. d.	s.	d.	s. d.
Washers	3	0	to 5 0	3	8	16 0 to 30 0
Wringers	3	0	to 3 6	3	4	15 0 to 20 0
Ironers—Starch	4	0	to 5 0	4	8	20 0 to 30 0
" Plain	3	0	to 5 0	3	9	14 0 to 25 0
" Shirt	3	6	to 5 0	4	9	20 0 to 30 0
Hangers out	3	0	to 4 0	3	5	14 6 to 18 6
Folders	2	6	to 3 6	3	1	6 0 to 15 0
Sorters.....				42	0	to 60 0

HOURS OF LABOUR.

From 7.45 or 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., with an hour or three-quarters of an hour for the midday meal for all hands six days a week, are the hours usually observed in all the large laundries. Where the work is not sufficient to occupy full time the number of days is proportionately reduced, and some laundries work only two or three days a week.

OVERTIME.

In one of the largest laundries overtime work to the extent of fifteen hours a week for females and twenty hours a week for males, has been the rule until quite recently, and in others it has prevailed to a considerable extent, although small laundries do not as a rule work full time. The rate of payment for overtime is usually the same as for ordinary time, but in some cases 6d. per hour is paid to all hands alike. Folders, whose ages range from 14 to 17 years, do more overtime than any other grade, for the reason that their work begins only when the others have finished.

HOLIDAYS.

In the large establishments where work is constant, varying only between full time and overtime, it is not customary to allow the workers to have any public holiday but Christmas Day, and absence without leave on any other day is punished by instant dismissal. As there is in most cases a greater press of work towards the end of the week it is always more difficult to obtain leave of absence at that time than in the earlier portion.

BONUSES AND FINES.

In one laundry a system is in force of giving a bonus of 2s. per week instead of an increase of wages, professedly as a reward for regular attendance. Half of this bonus, and half a day's pay, are forfeited by absence for half a day, and all the bonus and a full day's pay by a day's absence, without notice. A day's notice leaves the forfeiture of the bonus at the discretion of the employer. The bonus and wages for the number of days of absence are forfeited by absence through sickness. The same employer discharges without notice, yet holds back the first week's pay to prevent employees from leaving without giving a week's notice. Then, if they are compelled to leave without giving notice, whether by sickness or any other necessary cause, they forfeit whatever wages may be due at the time the bonus, and this half week's pay in addition.

EARNINGS.

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Workers engaged by the day are, in consequence of the nature of their work, idle for a day or two, some at the beginning, others at the end of the week, and their earnings are therefore proportionately reduced. Ironers, for instance, lose a portion of every week, and work an average of only five days, overtime included, earning an average of 22s. 6d. a week or an average wage of 4s. 6d. a day, whilst ironers engaged by the week receive an average of 24s. 3d. a week. Washers, on an average of 3s. 8d. a day, work only four and a half days a week and earn 16s. 6d., whilst those on weekly wages receive an average of 21s. The average earnings of all classes on daily wages amount to about 15s. 6d. a week, and of all on weekly wages to about 18s. a week, and the average week's work for all is very nearly five days a week. In some small laundries however the workers are rarely employed for more than two or three days a week, and their earnings are consequently much below this average.

DRYING ROOMS.

When the necessary space is available drying is carried on as far as possible in the open air, the roof of the laundry being sometimes utilised for the purpose, but a considerable portion of the drying must always be done indoors, even in fine weather. A hot room is therefore an indispensable adjunct to a public laundry, and several are attached to all the larger laundries. The "old style" of hot room is heated by furnaces or stoves, and labours under the defect of an unequal distribution of heat, clothes hanging near the fire being sometimes in danger of scorching, whilst those more remote do not dry quickly. The new style of hot room is heated by steam pipes, and is much more efficient and less expensive. In these rooms clothes are hung to dry on lines or "horses," the highest rungs being from 6 to 8 feet above the floor, and only to be reached by climbing on the lower. The temperature maintained is sufficient to dry a room full of clothes in about twenty minutes, and frequently produces evil effects on those subjected to it for any length of time. In some laundries, especially those using old style hot rooms, ironing is done in the same room, the irons being heated at the furnaces which heat the rooms, the comfort of the workers being studied less than economy of fuel and heat.

GENERAL REMARKS.

Clothes are collected for laundries from private dwellings, hotels, boarding-houses, ships, steamers, hospitals, and asylums, and it is asserted by laundry-keepers and workers that sufficient care is not exercised with regard to infected clothing. In consequence of the reprehensible practice of sending such clothing to laundries without first disinfecting it diphtheria and other diseases are said to have been contracted by sorters and washers, and the latter sometimes suffer from sore hands and partially paralysed arms from the same cause. With these exceptions, and the evils arising from working in the "hot rooms," the laundry business is not unhealthy in itself, but from carelessness with regard to drainage and infected clothing, danger to the public health may at any time arise. Even in the matter of transit negligence of the very grossest kind is sometimes displayed, as in the case of a carter who uses his vehicle alternately for carrying clothes for a hospital to and from the laundry, and for hawking vegetables.
